**In Remembrance of Him**
**October 2, 2011**

**John Buchanan, Pastor**
**Fourth Presbyterian Church**

**Psalm 34:1–10**
**Matthew 14:13–21**

**"And all ate and were filled."**
**Matthew 14:20 (NRSV)**

**The world is filled with abundance and freighted with generosity. If bread is broken and shared, there is enough for all. The creation is infused with the Creator's generosity.**

**Walter Brueggemann**
**"The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity"**
***The Christian Century,* 24 March 1999**

***Gracious Creator, the world is full of an abundance of what we need to live.***
***And, in Jesus Christ, you have given us bread for our deepest hunger.***
***Now silence in us any voice but your own,***
***that we may hear the word you have for us this morning.***
***Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.***

The best theological commentary on the feeding of the five thousand and one of my all-time favorite stories was told from this pulpit by Parker Palmer, Quaker theologian and popular author. We had invited him to lead a retreat and preach, and in his sermon he told a story that has now circulated widely and has been used by practically every preacher, including me, at least once. The story takes place in that time, long ago, fast receding in memory, when there were no security lines at airports, no electronic screening, and you could carry pretty much whatever you wanted in your briefcase or purse onto the airplane.

Palmer was on a flight from O'Hare to Denver that pulled away from the gate, taxied and taxied and taxied for a long time. You know the feeling. You look out the window and you're not near a runway in line to take off but are out in a remote corner of the airport looking at a chain-link perimeter fence; your heart sinks as the engines wind down. The pilot came on the intercom, "I have some bad news. There is a storm front in the west, exactly where we are headed. Denver is socked in and shut down. There are no alternatives.

So we'll be staying here for a few hours. That's the bad news. The really bad news is that we have no food on board." (This story is from that blessed time long ago when there was real food on board and passengers actually looked forward to a nice tray of real food with cloth napkins and silverware.)

Everybody groaned. Some passengers became angry. But then, Palmer said, one of the flight attendants stood up in the aisle and took the mike. "We're really sorry here, folks. We didn't plan it this way, and we can't do anything about it. We know that for some of you this is a big deal. You're hungry and were looking forward to a nice lunch. Some of you have a medical condition and really need to eat. Some of you may not care. So I have an idea. We have a couple of empty bread baskets up here, and we're going to pass them around. Everybody put something in the basket. I know some of you have brought a little snack along, just in case—peanut butter crackers, candy bars. Some of you have Rolaids, Life Savers, chewing gum. And if you don't happen to have anything edible, you have a business card or a picture of your kids or a bookmark. The thing is, I hope everybody puts something in the basket. And then we'll reverse the process. We'll pick the baskets up at the back of the plane and pass them around again and everybody can take out what he or she needs."

"Well," Palmer said, "what happened next was amazing. First, the complaining and griping stopped. People started to root around in pockets and handbags and briefcases. Some stood up and retrieved luggage from the overhead racks and got out boxes of candy, a salami, Italian sausage, cheese, crackers, a bottle of wine [it was in the day you could actually do that]. Now people were laughing and talking. The flight attendant had transformed a group of anxious people focused on their need, deprivation, and scarcity into a gracious community, sharing and in the process creating an abundance of sorts."

The flight eventually took off and landed, and as he stepped off the plane, Palmer found the flight attendant and said, "You know there's a story in the Bible about what you did." She said, "I know that story. That's why I did it."

It is a much-loved story. In the early Christian church, when the community gathered, under the cover of darkness, to break bread and drink wine and remember Jesus, they always read this story about the day he fed the multitude with five loaves and two fish.

The context of this story is very important. It begins, "Now when Jesus heard this he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place." What was the "this" that prompted him to withdraw in a boat to a deserted place? Jesus' cousin, John, who was the first to recognize and announce Jesus' significance and baptized Jesus in the Jordan River—we know him as John

the Baptist—had been arrested for publically insulting and harassing the puppet king, Herod. In a terrible sequence of events, Herod becomes entranced with a young dancing girl whose dancing, at a sumptuous royal banquet with plentiful food and wine, so inspires the king that he promises, probably under the influence of too much wine, to give her whatever she wishes. Inspired by her mother, who, in fact, is the king's girlfriend, she asks King Herod for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. And that is what happened, on the spot.

John's followers bury him and go find Jesus, tell him what happened. It's brutal, appalling, and terrifying. It must have stunned Jesus and broken his heart. John was family, a childhood playmate, an adolescent companion. They shared a deep faith and fierce commitment to the promises of their people. And now, in a bizarre instant, John is gone, murdered by a cruel and powerful tyrant to fulfill a drunken promise he made to an attractive teenager.

Matthew reports, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself." Of course he did. That's what you do when you receive devastating news. In addition to his personal grief, there was surely a new sense of his own vulnerability. This is what happens when you offend real power.

But the crowd that had been following him, listening to him teach, bringing their sick and lame and their children to be touched and healed and blessed —the crowd doesn't know what happened, so they follow along the lakeshore. "Send them away, Jesus," his friends advise. "It's time to take care of yourself. If ever anyone needed to be left alone for a while, it's you. Besides, it's late in the day. They're all hungry. They need food. We'll tell them to go away, go into town and buy some food and come back in the morning."

But Jesus, heartbroken, heartsick, has compassion. "They need not go away," he says. "You give them something to eat."

Barbara Brown Taylor says she wishes she was there to hear that, to see how they looked at each other when he said that. "What do you mean *we* should give them something to eat? All we have between us is five loaves of bread and two salted fish, which is hardly a snack for twelve men, never mind five thousand. There are five thousand people out there, Jesus. No disrespect intended, but you are not making sense" (*The Seeds of Heaven,* p.50).

They were operating out of a sense of scarcity, Barbara says. They looked at the crowd, assessed the need and their own meager resources, and came to the very sensible conclusion: there is not enough.

The thing about this familiar story is that Jesus didn't feed the multitudes. The disciples did. "You give them something to eat." I suppose we've all wondered about that story. What exactly happened that day? How did he do that? Let's simply go with what the text says. The disciples gave what they had and it was enough. It became an abundance. Maybe it was something like what happened on that airplane. Maybe Jesus' compassion and the disciples' trust and generosity were so humbling and inspiring that people began to dig in their pockets and share the scraps of bread they had brought along. Maybe they put money in and the disciples took turns running into town to buy bread. However it happened there was enough for all.

"When you are with Jesus you are inescapably in the bread business," Walter Brueggemann says. "You need bread to share because it is the work of Jesus to feed hungry people and express compassion concretely" (*Collected Sermons*, p.236).

And so it has always seemed to me that the church, whatever else it is, is in the bread business. Meals for the homeless, sack lunches for the hungry, will not resolve or even begin to address the enormous problem of world hunger, of hungry people in this land of plenty. Be that as it may, it has always seemed to me that one of the reasons the church is here is to be a place where the hungry are fed.

And so you can find food here on Sunday evening; on Monday and Friday evening, because of this church, over at Catholic Charities; and three days a week at noon at our own Social Service Center and at our food pantry. We just began a new program last week, administered by the Social Service Center staff. It's called Consumer Choice, and here is how it works. Instead of volunteers filling shopping bags with food and handing them to hungry guests, guests are now invited to use a small shopping cart to walk up and down the aisles of our expanded food pantry, take what they need, and maybe walk away with a little more dignity. I'm pretty confident Jesus would like that.

There is an ethical imperative in this story about the church of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ on earth, feeding hungry people.

And there is a personal moral imperative for you and me to trust God enough to begin to live not out of a sense of scarcity—that there isn't enough, so we have to save and preserve and hoard; that in order to be happy and secure we all need about 25 percent more than we currently have, as Studs Terkel once put it. The personal imperative is to listen to Jesus, watch him, and be transformed, converted by the grace of God we have seen and experienced in Jesus Christ to begin to live abundantly,

opening our hands, sharing what we have, confident that our meager resources, in God's hands, will always be transformed into abundance.

Anne Lamott said somewhere that when she begins to feel deprived it's a sure sign that she needs to start giving, find some homeless mothers and hand out tens and twenties. "I know that giving is the way we can be abundant," she says. "Giving is the way we fill ourselves up."

And there is more here than ethical challenge. There is gospel, good news for the hungry—and who among us is not, in some very real way, hungry?

"Thou hast made our hearts restless," St. Augustine wrote centuries ago, "until they rest in thee." Who doesn't know what that means? Hungry—for bread of heaven; thirsty for living water. That is why five thousand people followed him into the evening, past dinnertime, with gnawing hunger reminding them of their emptiness.

And that is why I came here this morning, and I suspect, if you thought much about it, that is why you came here this morning—on the outside chance that you might find bread for your deepest hunger.

This beloved old story reminds us that God's abundance is all around us, that the whole creation is full of God's love and grace, that every meal is a sacrament, that bread broken and shared is a reminder, a reenactment of his compassion, his grace, his generosity, his presence at every table, in every encounter, to meet every hunger.

When I was the minister, one summer long ago, in a small parish church in Kinlochleven, a village in the Western Highlands of Scotland, the Church of Scotland minister in the neighboring parish, Johnny Dunlop, reached out to me in friendship. He came to see me. We sat in the little manse study, had a cup of coffee and good long conversation. The next Sunday was Communion Sunday, and Johnny told me a story he said he recalled every time he presided at the Lord's Table and a story I remember every time I am privileged to stand behind the Lord's Table and break the bread and share the cup.

Johnny was in the infantry in the British Army in World War II. His unit was surrounded, and he was captured and ended up in a prisoner of war camp in Poland. It was dreadful: cold, wet, filthy, and worst of all, there was almost no food, just a bowl of thin soup and a scrap of bread once a day. Prisoners lost weight, until they were skin and bones, contracted diseases, and began to die. The war was not going very well for the Allies, and there didn't seem to be any reason for hope. As the tide began to turn and Germany's fortunes diminished, the conditions in the prisoner of war camp became worse, until some prisoners didn't want to go on living. One easy way to end it all, he

told me, was to throw yourself against the barbed wire fence as if trying to escape and be shot instantly by the guards. Johnny said that one night, deeply discouraged, depressed, and sick with despair and hunger, he slipped out of the barracks and walked toward the fence, not quite sure whether he ought simply to end it all. He sat down on the bare ground thinking. He sensed movement in the dark on the other side of the barbed wire. It was a Polish farmer. He had half a potato in his hand. He thrust the potato through the barbed wire. As Johnny Dunlop took it, the man said, in heavily accented English, “The Body of Christ.”

“And all ate and were filled and they took what was left over—twelve baskets full.” Later he would take bread and bless it and break it and give it to them and say:

> This is my body broken for you.
> Do this in remembrance of me.

Amen.